**CORE106 Fall 2015**

**October 16, 2015**

**Notes**

Don DeLillo *Libra*

**One of the muscles we’re trying to build is the ability to sort through a story with a lot of people and a lot of moving parts.**

Our strategy for reading Libra:

1. Make sure we understand the basic plot points. The book isn’t conveniently divided into chapters. The time jerks around. The history may not be perfectly clear.
2. Rebuild the argument as human tragedy. Extra credit: Link it to what we have already discovered or heard thus far.  
   1. I’m going to suggest themes. You suggest them too. They will repeat and we will see how DeLillo develops.
   2. Talk about how the book works as art. What sensations does it create or represent?
3. Work down from a thesis: the book is about chaos.

To say *Libra* is about the Kennedy assassination is like saying *Moby Dick* is about whaling.

*Libra* actually reveals:

* Deception.
* Self-delusion.
* Search for meaning…desire to part of something bigger than ourselves in history.
* Exploitation. If it were just a study about Oswald, it would be creepy enough. Add the CIA, and it’s terrible.

Passages with meaning:  
  
“Don’t you know the code, nineteen?” Mystery creates control. Uncertainty creates a pretext for control. (103)

“There are no right answers in this head. It is the stupidest of arrogance to give an answer you think is right.” (105)

“The police state is not Russia. It’s wherever we have the mind that can think up manuals full of rules for killing.” (106)

“The brig was the place where all the lines that were painted in the military mind were bright and clean forever. Once he understood that, he knew he had their number.” (108)

“He saw himself as part of something vast and sweeping. He was the product of a sweeping history.” (41)

1. Time changes everything. Oswald, CIA, Nicholas Branch, and the interlude about the Bay of Pigs  
     
   Track these institutions, places, and events: CIA, Guatemala, Cuba. Win Everett, Parminter, Banister, Ferrie, Mackey  
     
   CHAOS OF THE MOMENT: Everyone was a spook or a dupe… (57)  
     
   Banister’s rage toward the administration was partly a reaction to public life itself (62)  
     
   Konno: Life is hostile, he believed. The struggle is to merge your life with the greater tide of history. (87)

We immediately see Oswald displace, time and again. The subway is a metaphor for freedom, that just changing locations will change everything.

1. Notice the veil described by the social worker on p. 12.  
     
   Compare to statement on p. 17: “We tend to draw together to seek mutual solace for our disease.”
2. There is much here that is holy, an aberration in the heartland of the real.
3. Several instances where people believe they are watching themselves from a distance. Win Everett on p. 18
4. **“Knowledge was a danger, ignorance was a cherished asset.”** The notion of plausible deniability. Perverse extension of Socrates: you can be punished for revealing what you know.  
     
   “My little girl is generous with secrets. I wish she weren’t, frankly…” (p. 26). Isolation. Revealing knowledge is an act of defiance.   
   1. Oswald with his high school friend Robert Sproul: “This was like him, to be a misplaced martyr…. “(33)
   2. Nobody knew what he knew. The whirl of time, the true life inside him. (46)
   3. Everything is supposed to be something. But it never is. (65)
5. All of the CIA operatives, and Oswald, believe they can demonstrate their worth by placing themselves into history. A cause. (p. 28).
6. Notice how Oswald uses books (knowledge) to create isolation for himself. “The tougher the books, the more firmly he fixed a distance between himself and others.” (p. 34). Arguably, that explained the fascination with Marxism as well.
7. “So am I. I’m the one. I have rights.” Notice how observant he is about New Orleans. (p. 36).   
   1. The anguish of Oswald vis a vis his mother. Notice how isolated he is with her.
   2. **Ask Emma to talk about the passage on page 40, playing chess with the girl. We know he is repulsive. Does Lee know it? How we punish social awkwardness?**
8. Why do you think a Negro would want to be communist? Ferrie
9. Addicted to stimulus: “I believe there are forces in the air that compel men to act…” (68)
10. “You can’t surrender your rage and shame to these endless complications.”
11. Everett imagining Oswald: “We lead more interesting lives than we think. We are characters in plots…” (78)
12. Oswald’s personal struggle with reading: if you can’t reveal yourself, these problems never get solved. (83)
13. Abuse. Watch what happens when “…this brought forth a certain lurking satisfaction, familiar falsehearted, awful, and he went completely limp.” (88)